

Dolph

Action man Dolph Lundgren is a *Video World* favourite. This month he's riding high in the charts as the *Universal Soldier*, so we sent Martyn Clayden along to discover what makes Sweden's most muscular import tick. You may be surprised at what he found out..

"*Universal Soldier*", explained the film's director Roland Emmerich, "is a modern retelling of the classic *Frankenstein* myth. These perfect soldiers feel no pain and have no emotion; they are soulless beings who merely follow orders".

Many fans of the renegade super-soldier who stars as the arch-villain of this high-tech, high-energy thriller may feel that Emmerich has neatly encapsulated Dolph Lundgren's limited cinematic appeal. After all, doesn't he come from the same brain-dead, muscle-bound mould as Sly Stallone, his co-star Jean-Claude van Damme, mad wrestler Hulk Hogan, and Arnie Schwarzenegger?

Well, strange as it may seem, no he doesn't. For a start, the towering Swede was all set for an academic career, and only strayed into acting by accident. The son and brother of engineers, he not surprisingly studied for a chemical engineering degree at the Royal Institute of Technology in Stockholm, at Washington State University and Clemson University in South Carolina, at Sydney University in Australia, and finally topped it all off with a Fulbright Fellowship to MIT the following year.

But secretly he was aware that there was more to life than tinkering with test-tubes (creating *Frankensteins* and *Universal Soldiers*?), and on a brief visit to New York was wowed by the

entertainment industry. Enter Dolph in a variety of incarnations as a rock drummer, a model, and ultimately an

This multi-layered Lundgren is a facet that most of the public are blissfully unaware of, and it still makes Dolph grin - which he does, incidentally, a great deal - every time he thinks about it:

"A person can usually do only a few things in a lifetime. Acting is a way in which I can do it all. As an actor I can switch more quickly from one part of my personality to another than I can in real life. But I always felt that even if I wasn't an actor I'd want to try doing as many things as possible.

"Twelve years ago I was in Sweden training for karate (he was captain of the Swedish full-contact karate team and winner of the European Heavyweight Full-Contact Karate Championship in 1980 and 1981) and the only connection I had with movies was going to the cinema to see *Rocky* or something like that. Now I make movies - you can never tell how things will develop".

Certainly his imposing height and cool, Scandinavian exterior didn't signal Perfect Romantic Lead when he first began his assault on Hollywood. They saw instead (Probably Foreign) Principal Sonofabitch, and cast him as an expendable KGB agent in

the Timothy Dalton Bond vehicle *A View To a Kill* (1985).

There he had time to have a good hard look at the action adventure movie (which he liked), and to rub sinewy shoulders with wildcat Grace Jones

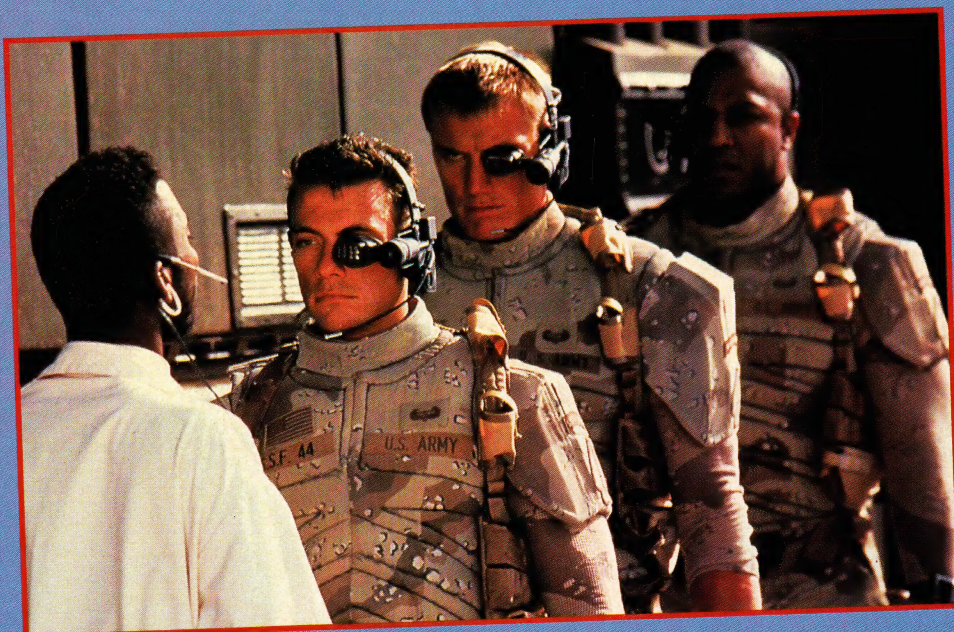


actor.

His love of the martial arts began when he was 14, and he rapidly progressed to become both a black-belt karate instructor and a combat instructor in the Swedish Marine Corps.

War





(which he liked a great deal more). What was more important, the moguls of Tinsel Town were so impressed with his pectorals on screen that he was singled out to be the Italian Stallion's awesome opponent in *Rocky 4* (1985).

Ironically, Russian murder machine Drago was prepared for his fights by being pumped full of steroids and having a team of scientists running him through a perpetual series of body-endurance tests to make him more efficiently lethal. He put it into practice by killing the American champ Apollo Creed (prompting the classic line, "If he dies, he dies!"), before attempting to do the same to the diminutive Sly in the frozen wastes of Commie-bound Russia.

But this being a 'glasnost' movie, Drago realises - albeit three-quarters of the way through the fight - that he's being turned into a soulless being just expected to follow orders, and instantly becomes a Good Guy before Sly decks him with a crisp uppercut.

Hollywood now had him neatly pigeonholed as the Sinister Slav, but before they could return to that theme, Dolph confounded them all by taking the superhero role of He-Man in *Masters of the Universe* (1987): the only movie to have grown out of a range of extensive merchandising, rather than vice versa.

This proved to be an immensely enjoyable sub-Conan romp with He-Man carrying his ongoing feud with the drastically undernourished Skeletor (Frank Langella) into the 'real' world before ending with a *Star Wars* type battle over the Void. Dolph obviously decided that he preferred being on the winning side, and it showed in his more relaxed and humorous performance.

So the next time the film producers came knocking on his door to play a Sinister Slav in *Red Scorpion* (1989), he agreed on the basis that he ended up

on the A-team. The script thus called on him to be one of the Russian army's 'Spetsnaz', who'd been trained to feel no pain or emotion but just follow orders, etc., which in this case meant killing off an African rebel leader opposed to the local Communist regime.

Within twenty minutes Dolph did a complete volte-face, convinced himself that all the 'insurgents' were really freedom fighters (and were therefore cool dudes), and joined them to combat the evils of the Red Menace. Audiences loved the stunts and explosions, they even liked Dolph as another hero, but they gave the dialogue and the ludicrous plot-twists the big thumbs down.

Undeterred, he then opted for a radical shift in typecasting, and re-emerged as the Crusading Cop. This persona was one he'd adopt for the next four films, and rightfully earned him a new legion of fans who'd hitherto had serious doubts about his humanity.

As *The Punisher* (1989) he was renegade cop Frank Castle whose wife and children are killed by the Mafia. In reprisal, he goes underground and over the top, managing to knock off 125 hoods in five years as an avenging leather-clad biker. When Mob boss Jeroen Krabbe is then attacked by the Japanese Mafia, Frank pauses to see whether they'll complete his work for him.

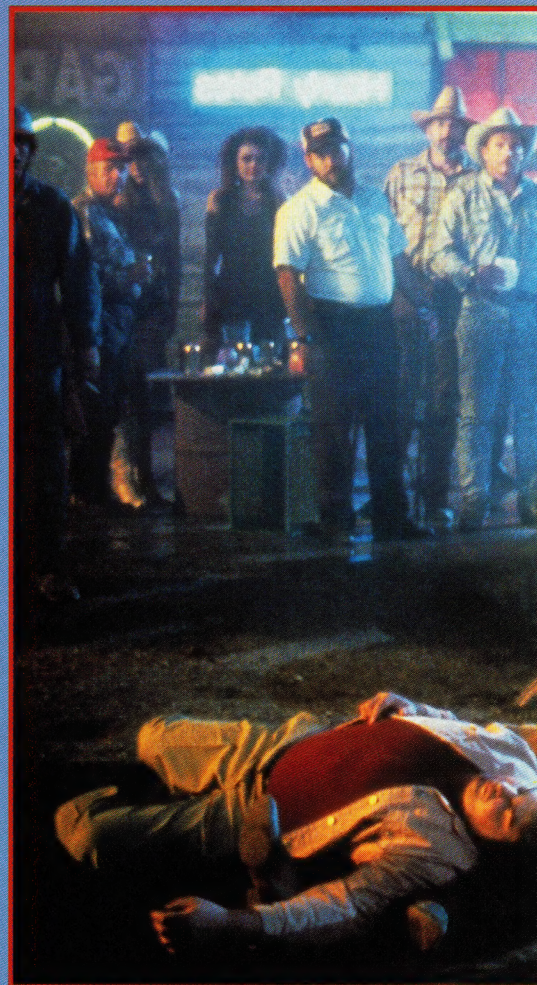
But, softy that he is, he takes exception to the nasty Nips kidnapping Jeroen's children, and joins with his former enemy to remind them that you can't do things like that in America. OK, this plot is just as inane as *Red Scorpion*, but its tone is so deliberately comic-strip and Dolph's witty one-liners (learnt, no doubt from 007) are so refreshing that you can forgive him.

With one success under his belt

(although it only had a video release in the UK), Dolph next chose the less extreme *Dark Angel* (1990), a sci-fi thriller in which maverick cop Jack Caine battles against an extra-terrestrial drug-dealer who's come to Earth looking for suitable victims. Dolph was convinced that he was at last approximating the kind of roles he'd been seeking:

"Let's face it," he said at the time, "I haven't made that many movies but in the ones I've done, the characters were very physical and there wasn't much dimension or shading.

"Jack Caine's more multi-



dimensional than anyone I've played before. He's certainly more caring, more sensitive, has a sense of humour, and is a leader. This is closer to realism. It's not of course, but it's a good step for me to play a real person who reacts to things with a variety of emotions".

He's helped by the use of a by-the-book partner in the shape of strait-laced FBI agent Smith (Brian Benben), who acts as useful foil for the Swede's playful barbs. He's also quite happy to be upstaged by former West German decathlon champion Mathias Hues as the skyscraping albino alien with a deadly line in sharp-edged CD's.

Generosity of spirit is another of Dolph's unrecognised trademarks. Not

only does he still return to Sweden every year to train the Marines, but he's also reticent to criticise any of the reigning Hulks in public. He's generally respectful of Stallone, preferring to target instead the possible pitfalls brought by fame:

"If you go round looking like you do on the screen, with twenty-five minders and a private plane, you set yourself up for problems. If you travel everywhere first class and get everything done for you from the moment you get up, you end up living in a fantasy world".

Likewise, his admiration for Big Arnie is utterly unfeigned. "Five years

Jackson's played by seasoned veteran Lou Gosset Jr., who Dolph had previously fought alongside in *The Punisher*. For *Showdown in Little Tokyo* (1992, Warner Home Video) he returned to being the Crusading Cop in what amounts to a synthesis of *The Punisher* and *Dark Angel*.

Chris Kenner was brought up in Japan but saw his parents slain by the Yakuza. Johnny Murata (Brandon Lee, son of Bruce, currently riding high with *Rapid Fire*) is a Japanese-American more interested in MTV than tae-kwon-do. Both opposites, though, become united when the Yakuza try to bring a

spotlight with the Muscles from Brussels in *Universal Soldier* (Guild Home Video).

Both Luc Devreux and Andrew Scott are part of an elite fighting force, possessed of superhuman strength and totally lacking in fear, emotion, and memory. For they've been programmed to erase their past and concentrate on improving their bodies with dangerous levels of steroids.

Then gradually images from the past start to trickle back, and Jean-Claude goes on the run with a pretty reporter with Dolph, who still thinks he's fighting the Vietnam War, in hot pursuit. It's fast, bloody, and exciting, and easily one of Dolph's finest roles to date. But perhaps the strain of dealing with the cocksure Belgian finally proved too much, as their much publicised pushing match on the steps of the Palais in Cannes seemed to underscore.

As Emmerich ironically observed, "Medical technology might be able to alter the physical body, but it doesn't yet know how to tamper with, or eradicate, the spiritual part of a person, and therein lies the conflict of our story".

For Dolph Lundgren, the time may at last have arrived where the Hollywood execs. look beyond the impressive pecs and the Sinister Slav to let out the unused talent still lurking beneath.



ago when Arnold was beginning to make movies people laughed at him. Now the same people who laughed loudest are offering him all the money in the world and begging him to make films for them. I don't think we'll always be making the same sort of films".

To illustrate the point, in *Cover Up* (1991, Guild Home Video) he's a tough ex-marine journalist sent to an overseas U.S. naval base to investigate a fishy 'terrorist attack'. Coming across a wall of non-cooperation from the base officers, he learns from a former colleague that a nerve gas canister had been stolen and a cover-up is being maintained by his old adversary Colonel Lou Jackson.

new lethal drug into L.A. Much flying feet and ultra-violence later, the villains realise just what a Big Mistake that was.

It might have been expected that Dolph would have settled into this witty-action genre for some time, but as ever he proved restless. So he accepted the challenge of sharing the

